Students create solutions to bullying by narrating dramas and arguing for reparations.

Exploring Character through Narrative, Drama, and Argument

Many character education initiatives in schools focus on an effort to prepare future adult citizens to act responsibly in a civil society. A more immediate intent is to get kids to behave in school, including the effort to reduce or eliminate bullying. Peter Smagorinsky points out that character education initiatives vary widely and don't all agree on the criteria for defining character. A further limitation of some of these initiatives is the reduction of character education to the reciting of pledges, displaying posters with pithy slogans, or presentations by character educators such as the local “community service” police officer. But we judge that if teachers and other leaders in schools are going to have a significant impact on the reduction of bullying, they will need to engage students in thinking beyond slogans to probe into the character of a bully and seek to find constructive ways to change the dynamics that foster bullying. Writing, reading, and dramatic performance have long been powerful means for representing and contending with thorny problems, and we see much promise in engaging students in authoring the dramas and solutions that represent their fears and their hopes for resolutions.

In this article we share a series of writing activities and their related discussions that invite students to understand the motivations that might prompt bullying behaviors on the playground and in the world at large. The students' writing and their observations during discussions reveal that their sense of fair play and the need for safe conduct in their daily lives allows them to author constructive ways to mediate problems and to find reasonable ways to make amends. The activities cross the boundaries of grade levels and can be appropriate for upper grades of elementary school through high school, as students learn to rely on writing and drama to represent their fears and project their hopes for resolution and safety.

Writing a Collaborative Narrative

The set of prompts that follow invite students to work collaboratively to write their own hero story, with elementary school students thrust into the hero role and the school bully representing the villain. We have found that the students recognize a familiar conflict, with three friends contending with a schoolyard bully. In our experience, students enjoy writing together with classmates, as they practice a means-end strategy to produce their story. A further benefit is that they can compare their own story with others of the same type. By the time students reach middle school or high school, they have been exposed to several variations on the basic hero story. When students write their own hero story and compare it to others they have experienced, they can generalize about the pattern and speculate about why the narrative form persists. In the process of working with the literature, learners can see how specific forms can represent the conflicts that touch their own lives.

Here is the format for the activity: After the teacher notes that the students will be writing a story together, she or he assigns a specific episode to each of six groups. The specific group writing prompts include only the beginning and end
The Playground Bully: A Story in Six Episodes

Episode 1

Beginning Sentence: When Shelley, Byron, and Keith parked their bikes and walked onto the playground, they saw the same sort of scene that had terrorized them at John L. Lewis School since August.

End Sentence: As the boy lifted himself from the ground, muddy saliva oozed from the corner of his mouth, and Dillon jangled the loose change in his mud-caked fist.

Episode 2

Beginning Sentence: At lunch that day, Dillon leaned over their table and hissed, “I’ll see you three after school.”

End Sentence: They pulled their bikes into Shelley’s yard, panting softly and marveling about how they had outrun their menace.

Episode 3

Beginning Sentence: The next morning, the three friends stopped their bikes at the far end of the playground and puzzled how they would get to the bike rack and slip into school past Dillon, who stood with his arms crossed at the main entrance of the school.

End Sentence: They walked safely down the hall for now, but they knew that they could not get into school the same way every day.

Episode 4

Beginning Sentence: When Shelley emerged the next morning from her grandmother’s basement apartment, she held in her hand the simple gift her grandmother had given her, claiming that she would appreciate its value more and more every day.

End Sentence: They had escaped his grasp once again, and recognized that this common object had liberated them from their tormentor.

Episode 5

Beginning Sentence: Two of Dillon’s friends sat on the bike rack at Lewis School, apparently waiting for the three to arrive.

End Sentence: Safely inside their classroom, they realized how lucky they were this time that help had arrived, but they knew that help would not always be there.

Episode 6

Beginning Sentence: As the three friends mounted their bikes and began to pedal away, Dillon and his two buddies stepped into their path.

End Sentence: When it was all over, everyone appreciated that what Shelley, Byron, and Keith had done was difficult; and they realized that life at John L. Lewis Elementary School would never be the same.

The following exchange among four students is a composite of conversations that groups of students have had in composing an episode. The exchange reveals their efforts to work out Episode 6 in a way that links the sentences and turns the bully away from his bullying behavior and toward a connection with the rest of the school community.

Renaldo: I’d like it to be a good situation if they go back to school, that they stood up to Dillon. If it’s bad, they stood up to Dillon and they became bullies themselves. They go down the path and one of them falls off his bike.

Claudia: So, he falls off his bike?

Renaldo: They came to a stop real fast in front of the three boys.

Claudia: Do we know their names?

Renaldo: I don’t know. I picture them on the Prairie Path, and these guys jump out in front of them and they stand up to the bullies and then become bullies themselves.

Claudia: But how would everyone appreciate them? It says that everyone appreciated them.
“Why are you doing this? Why are you bullying kids?” asked Shelley.

Dillon froze and turned his head and whispered, “You wouldn’t get it. You’re a nerd anyway.” Dillon’s friends chimed in: “Yeah you wouldn’t get it!”

“If I’m such a nerd, then I should obviously understand!” stated Shelley.

“You won’t get it! You won’t understand! My life is harder than you think! Does your dad work at a fast food joint for 15 hours a day? Did your mom leave you when you were 6? No. So leave me alone!” exclaimed Dillon.

“Why would I leave if you’re the one bullying us?” screamed Shelley.

“How would I leave if you’re the one bullying us?” exclaimed Dillon. His face became crimson red and crinkled.

“Dude, chill out!” added Keith. “We aren’t going to tell anyone, as long as you don’t turn us into meat.”

“Even though hamburgers are my favorite, you can’t turn us into it!” Byron added. They all chuckled at Byron’s comment, even Dillon.

“Dude, chill out!” added Keith. “We aren’t going to tell anyone, as long as you don’t turn us into meat.”

“Even though hamburgers are my favorite, you can’t turn us into it!” Byron added. They all chuckled at Byron’s comment, even Dillon.

They didn’t back down, but they didn’t fight. Somehow Dillon understood that they understood him, and he had no reason to act tough.

When it was all over, everyone appreciated that what Shelley, Byron, and Keith had done was difficult; and they realized that John L. Lewis Elementary school would never be the same.

This portion of a simple narrative served as a draft from which students could extend their representation of the bullying drama. Working in teams, and with the help of a drama teacher, the students converted the narrative into a script, rehearsed, and performed the scenes. This preparation allowed them to record their drama on video, which became a resource for teachers at earlier grades to use in portraying bullying behavior for the sake of prompting discussion about how to contend with bullies and how to fashion their own behavior. With a little coaching in dramatics, the students could represent the key scenes of the narrative in tableaux, which they could photograph to convert into a graphic presentation of the story, offering another way to share the narrative with other audiences.

Jerome Bruner suggests that narratives help thinkers to understand the world around them. The organization of a sequence of events into a...
discernible pattern can help someone to recall what has happened and to make sense of its significance. In developing a fictional narrative, a writer tries to understand human motivation and emotion—why characters do the things they do and act upon the emotions they feel. The construction of the fictional narrative can also be the means by which the writer represents how fellow human beings should behave and how the world should function. In this case, the students tried to enter the mind of the bully. They did not see the invented bully character as “motiveless malignity,” as Coleridge observed about Iago. Instead, they speculated about the conditions in the life of the bully to account for his behavior. They didn’t demonize him, but they sought a way to bring him back into community with his peers.

When students authored their narrative and crafted their dramatic representation of it, we noticed some surprising choices. Students who seemed to be lacking in confidence during the daily interchanges in the classroom, especially students who might have been bullied themselves, were willing to take risks in enacting a character in the drama. We were surprised also that students who had been rather reserved in class volunteered to portray the bully. It seemed to us that in the effort to construct the characters for the sake of the narrative, the students attempted to enter the minds of the characters to sense what they felt and to understand what motivated them. Instead of turning away from an unsympathetic character, the students seemed to want to show viewers how bullies acted and to reveal why the bully acted the way he did.

Proposing Reparations

Bullies live on school playgrounds, but they also operate on a larger stage, as we see in imaginative literature and in history. In their school lives, students have to formulate how to contend with bullies. In school and in society at large, we have to decide what to do with bullies, both to reclaim them if we can or to demand reparations if we must. We can think about significant works of literature in which the bullies are not always obvious, perhaps including *The Tempest*, *Wuthering Heights*, or *Heart of Darkness*. In other works, such as *Things Fall Apart*, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, and *Night*, the bullies are obvious, but the repairs owing to the victims, especially if the victims are a whole people and their ancestors, are less obvious. We trusted that students came to our classes with a sense of what should be the reparations owed to victims, and it was a matter of tapping into this knowledge to devise a standard for making critical judgments. Here are three examples of problem-based scenarios that prompted discussion about the concept of reparations.

You Be the Judge

What are the appropriate reparations?

1. During a dispute about the use of a friend’s jump rope, eight-year-old Stella Jenkins bit her neighbor, seven-year-old Lucy Madison. The bite on Lucy’s forearm hurt very much, drew a little blood, and left Lucy in tears. After Lucy reported the incident to her mother, Mrs. Madison brought Lucy back to the Jenkins home, described the scene to Mrs. Jenkins, and demanded an apology from Stella to Lucy. Reluctantly, Stella said, “OK. I’m sorry. So there.” Lucy was not satisfied. Her arm still hurt, and it would probably be bruised for days. Sufficiently traumatized by the attack, Lucy would remain afraid to play with Stella again. To what extent is the apology a satisfactory repair? If more reparations are necessary, what would you expect? If Stella has done all she could do, how would you explain this to Lucy?

2. Last summer, Garrick saw his neighbor Benjamin’s bicycle lying unattended on the lawn in front of Benjamin’s house. Garrick was in a hurry to make it to swim team practice at a pool a mile away, so he took Benjamin’s bike and rode it to the pool, with the intention to return it to Benjamin after practice. But Garrick kept the bike for another two weeks, riding to practice, visiting friends, and generally cruising around town. When Benjamin’s parents discovered that Garrick had the bike, they demanded an apology from Stella to Lucy. Reluctantly, Stella said, “OK. I’m sorry. So there.” Lucy was not satisfied. Her arm still hurt, and it would probably be bruised for days. Sufficiently traumatized by the attack, Lucy would remain afraid to play with Stella again. To what extent is the apology a satisfactory repair? If more reparations are necessary, what would you expect? If Stella has done all she could do, how would you explain this to Lucy?
but Benjamin wasn’t satisfied. He wanted more. After all, his bike was not in the same condition as it was when it was taken. He was denied use of the bike for two weeks when he could have used it to ride to soccer practice and to visit his friends. What, if anything, do you think Garrick owes Benjamin? What would be the appropriate repair for his loss?

3. When Enrico Octavo entered Roosevelt School as a first grader, his teacher, Miss Willingham, told him that he was to be known as Henry (the English equivalent of Enrico) from that day forward. Although Henry’s parents were proud immigrants from Italy, Miss Willingham insisted that he never speak Italian in school. “You’re American now, and you must speak English like everyone else in Roosevelt School.” As the students began to work on their penmanship, Miss Willingham noticed that Henry held his pencil in his left hand. She insisted that he write with his right hand. “Using the left hand is a sign of the devil,” said the superstitious Miss Willingham, and she corrected Henry every time he attempted to write with his left hand. By the time Henry reached college, he spoke little Italian, and he wrote right-handed. As he began to reflect more and more on who he was as a person, he decided that Miss Willingham had robbed him of a lot by trying to separate him from his Italian heritage and by forcing him to write right-handed, when using his left hand was more natural. He thought that he would return to Roosevelt School to visit Miss Willingham, if she was still there, and demand some compensation for what she had taken from him. What could Miss Willingham do at this point as reparation for the loss that Henry felt? Why would this be appropriate?

We have discussed the scenarios in several classes, and here is a typical exchange during a whole-class discussion about one conflict:

**Tom:** (Referring to the first scenario) Do you think that Stella has done enough in apologizing to Lucy?

**Liza:** She should apologize, but it is the way she apologizes that is the problem.

**Danny:** Yeah. It’s like she doesn’t really care. She is apologizing because the adults are making her. I don’t think she believes she really did anything wrong.

**Tom:** But how can anyone make her feel sorry?

**Joy:** The apology has to be real. She can’t be snotty about it. At least she has to make an attempt to sound sincere.

**Tom:** So as a repair in this situation, you want a sincere apology? Is that enough? Felicia, what do you think?

**Felicia:** There has to be a sincere apology. I agree with that. But she should do something more. I mean, after all, she made Lucy’s arm bleed, and made her cry. Lucy is probably going to have a scar there for awhile.

**Liza:** Maybe she, Stella, should do something nice for Lucy to show that she is sorry. She should bake cookies or something.

**Tom:** So you might call this punitive damage, if you want her to extend herself and maybe inconvenience herself for Lucy’s sake.

**Liza:** I don’t know about that, but she should do something nice.

In this brief exchange, the students show themselves working out the guidelines to judge when repairs are necessary and how one could judge the nature and extent of the repairs. As the students worked out a set of criteria, they defined the concept of reparations. This definition became useful when the students in turn discussed and wrote about a problem case.

The following case invites students to apply their reparations guidelines to a situation that they see as a possibility for behaviors that they could observe in schools. The villains and the victim are obvious; the problem requires actions that will not imitate the bullies’ behaviors, but will instruct them about the harm that they have done and will guide them in making amends. The process of responding to the case requires that the students work with each other to evaluate the actions of the bullies, to recognize the harm to the victim, and to recommend the appropriate repairs.
Demanding Repairs

Directions: The principal, teachers, and students at Joseph Hill Middle School ask for your help in taking the right action toward a current student and a former student at their school. The brief story below describes the source of the problem. You will want to talk about the story with two or three of your classmates before you decide the appropriate action.

The Story: Jimmy Farfel is beginning eighth grade at Joseph Hill Middle School. Since Jimmy was in third grade at John L. Lewis Elementary School, he has been the victim of bullying at the hands of Landon Kramden and his sister Leila. Landon is also entering eighth grade at Hill Middle School, but his sister Leila graduated in June and is entering ninth grade at Floodrock High School.

Many people at Joseph Hill Middle School have become more sensitive to the problems with bullies. They recognize that bullying can take many forms, including physical harm, threats, teasing, and cruel remarks. Bullying has even found its way onto the Internet, where bullies have posted unflattering pictures and mean gossip about fellow students. Part of the problem is that the victims of bullying have been too afraid to tell anyone about the hurt they have suffered. But a recent campaign has encouraged students to come forth with their stories. This has prompted Jimmy Farfel to tell his story about Landon and Leila Kramden. Jimmy claims that the brother and sister have done these things to him:

- Stole lunch money from him, leaving him on many days with nothing to eat for lunch.
- Hit him and twisted his arm in a painful position when he resisted giving up his lunch money.
- Knocked books out of his hands in crowded hallways and laughed at him as he struggled to pick up scattered papers amid a wave of feet.
- Took his graphing calculator for their own use, causing Jimmy to get into trouble with his math teacher for forgetting to bring the calculator to class.
- Called him many insulting names in front of other students.
- Teased him about wearing a Cubs jersey, because they were Cardinals fans and hated the Cubs.
- Threatened to beat him up if he wore any Cubs clothing to school, scaring Jimmy into never wearing the emblem of his favorite team again.
- Took a picture of Jimmy when it looked like he was picking his nose on the playground and posted the photo on a website that invited viewers to write cruel comments.
- Wrote nasty rumors about Jimmy on the website, including the claim that he had a crush on Mrs. Zeeler, the ancient library assistant at the school.

When Dr. Philoman, the principal, talked to Landon about these reports, at first he denied he did any of the things that Jimmy claimed. When other students confirmed that the reports were true, Landon said, “So what? He deserved it. He is such a little twerp.” Leila also admitted her role in the bullying, but she said, “I don’t even go to that school any more, so what do you think you can do to me? And a lot of that stuff happened away from school. You have no control over what I do away from school.”

Jimmy’s parents are quite upset, and they want Landon and Leila to do something to make up for all of the harm that they did to Jimmy. They want both restitution (giving money back) and some form of punitive action (punishment). They have suggested the following possibilities:

- Giving back all of Jimmy’s stolen lunch money, plus a little extra.
- Buying Jimmy a new graphing calculator.
- Removing all of the harmful and insulting material from the website.
- Apologizing to Jimmy in front of his classmates.
- Apologizing to the current and former students of Joseph Hill Middle School who might have witnessed the abuse to Jimmy.
- Wearing Cubs apparel to school for several days.
- Buying Jimmy a new Cubs jersey.
- Completing 100 hours of community service each by making anti-bullying posters and by talking to church youth groups about the harms of bullying.
Talking to Your Partners: Talk to your classmates about these possibilities. What do you think would be the best way for Landon and Leila to make up for the harm they have done to Jimmy? Do you think any of the actions listed above would be fair? Do you think any of the actions would not be appropriate? Can you think of other actions that have not been listed? For each action, explain why you think this is a fair or unfair compensation for the things that Landon and Leila have done to Jimmy. You will want to take notes during the discussion so that you have notes ready for a written response.

Discussion and Written Response

The discussions among the students prepared them to respond. Their speculations about possible actions allowed each writer to explore options and to choose the most appropriate repairs in light of the guidelines that they had established earlier. The recommendations emphasized moderation, with the expectation that the punishments for the bullies would be more instructive than punitive. The following excerpts represent the typical responses:

To me, these cruel acts are unfair and unacceptable. It is time to work with the parents to find appropriate punishments. Landon and Leila have admitted what they have done, but they don’t see the harm. So I think we should choose a punishment that opens their eyes. Some punishments that the parents might agree to would have Leila and Landon buying Jimmy a new calculator and doing 100 hours of community service. I think this is fair because it shows them what they did was wrong. After this punishment they shouldn’t ever think of bullying anyone ever again. When they learn what they did was wrong, it will bring out the best in them.

I didn’t choose the other possible punishments because they're unfair to the bullies. For example, if I chose the punishment of wearing Cubs jerseys to school, that doesn’t change who they are and teach them what they did was wrong. I didn’t pick these other options because they don’t teach.

—Erin Anderson

Our experience suggests that students learn about the behavior of bullies, the experience of victims, and the appropriate responses to bullying behaviors through contending together with the realistic problem situations that can occur in schools every day. The anti-bullying posters in the hall and the reciting of character pledges remain static by comparison. By writing narratives, performing constructed dramas, and composing arguments, all through collaborative efforts, the students project their concerns and construct solutions. Their story, drama, and arguments connect to the literature they read and assist them in contending with the real problems that invade their lives.

Works Cited


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READWritethink CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

This lesson invites students to explore the things relevant to a character from Lorraine Hansberry’s play A Raisin in the Sun, such as Mama’s plant, to unlock the drama’s underlying symbolism and themes. Students explore character traits and participate in active learning as they work with the play, and they use an interactive drama map to explore character and conflict, and write and share character-item poems. http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/unlocking-underlying-symbolism-themes-272.html